

Helen Müller, Pierluigi Ledda, and Patrizia Rebullà

## The letters of Casa Ricordi

**Abstract:** The *Archivio Storico Ricordi* holds the historical records of one of the most important music publisher of all times. For almost two hundred years, beyond their main business as music publishers, the Ricordis were also impresarios, agents, and cultural organisers, and played a central and unique mediating role within Italian musical life. This role is very well documented by some 30,000 autograph letters addressed to Casa Ricordi by composers, writers, librettists, singers and conductors, and an impressive and neatly ordered collection of around 600,000 sent letters. The whole collection will be published online bit by bit. The goal of the project is to connect the letters not only with the relevant records of the Ricordi archive (ledgers, contracts, stage designs, scores, pictures...), but also with other music archives over the web.

**Keywords:** Publishing house archive, letter indexing, manuscript OCR, crowdsourcing

### Bertelsmann and the *Archivio Storico Ricordi*

**Zusammenfassung:** Das *Archivio Storico Ricordi* sammelt historische Materialien eines der bedeutendsten Musikverlagshäuser aller Zeiten. Über fast 200 Jahre prägten die Ricordis nicht nur durch ihre Verlagstätigkeit, sondern ebenso als Impresarios, Agenten, Kulturförderer und -manager das italienische Musikleben. Rund 30000 an die Ricordis gerichtete autografe Schreiben von Komponisten, Schriftstellern, Librettisten, Sängern und Dirigenten sowie 600000 von den Ricordis verfasste Briefe dokumentieren die herausragende Rolle der Verlegerfamilie. Die gesamte Sammlung wird nach und nach online zur Verfügung gestellt. Dabei werden die Schriftstücke nicht nur mit anderen Objekten des Ricordi-Archivs wie Verlagsbüchern, Verträgen, Bühnenentwürfen, Noten, Bildern, sondern ebenso mit Materialien anderer Musikerarchive im Web verlinkt.<sup>1</sup>

**Schlüsselwörter:** Verlagsarchiv, Brieferschließung, Handschriften-OCR, Crowdsourcing

The *Archivio Storico Ricordi*<sup>2</sup> dates from the founding of the Ricordi publishing house in 1808. In 1994, the Bertelsmann Music Group (BMG), part of the German media group, acquired the famous Italian music giant. Although the music publishing business was sold later to the Universal Publishing

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Müller.

<sup>2</sup> <http://archivioricordi.com>.

Music Group, a subsidiary of France's Vivendi Group, the historical archive remained with Bertelsmann.

Founded as a publishing house in 1835, Bertelsmann is well aware of the responsibility that such a valuable cultural legacy entails, and this acquisition was another important confirmation of Bertelsmann's international cultural commitment in the context of the global (media) economy.

This commitment opened a new chapter in the history of the Archivio Storico Ricordi, since Bertelsmann devoted remarkable resources to safeguarding and preserving the archive's records. Ricordi & Co., the legal entity behind the archive, is strongly focused on making the archive's inventory accessible, aspiring to become an international best-practice case for communicating the content of historical archives in the digital age. Many ongoing projects and partnerships – such as the one described in this article – are aimed at the digital publication of inventories, but also at presenting the archive in the context of current performances and new productions.

Bertelsmann is pursuing a clear objective with this: preserving the Archivio Storico Ricordi only makes sense if its inventories can be successfully embedded in a contemporary context, and can serve to renew our perspective on the past. This process occurs at a time when European culture – which undoubtedly includes the tradition of opera represented by Ricordi – faces great challenges and the preservation of its heritage is becoming a priority in cultural policy. Many questions arising from the long history of the Ricordi publishing house are still relevant today, such as the compatibility of art and business, of creativity and entrepreneurship. Luckily, these terms were never contradictory in this unique company history.

## **1 The main activities of the *Archivio Storico Ricordi***

Considered to be one of the most important private music archives, the Archivio Storico Ricordi preserves the original handwritten scores of 23 of Verdi's 28 operas, all of Giacomo Puccini's operas except *La Rondine*, numerous works by Bellini, Rossini, Donizetti and their contemporaries, and operas by modern composers including Nono, Donatoni, Sciarrino and Bussotti. In 1994 — the same year that Ricordi was acquired by the German media company Bertelsmann — the collection of the archive was placed under the protection of Italy's cultural authorities. Bertelsmann dedicated considerable attention to the preservation of the company's precious historical archive, a unique testament to its cultural and entrepreneurial history and to its wider appreciation. The Archivio Ricordi protects, preserves, and promotes knowledge of this artistic and documentary heritage, providing both research services and digitisation. It also makes the materials available to cultural organisations, including universities and educational institutions. By the end of 2005, the Archivio

began to catalogue and digitise its holdings according to the standards set by the Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale (SBN, National Library Service). Documents pertaining to Giuseppe Verdi and Giacomo Puccini are now available, to both scholars and general readers, at the internet site of the Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo Unico (ICCU, Central Institute for the Union Catalogue of Italian Libraries and Bibliographic Information).<sup>3</sup>

The Ricordi archive is currently engaged in developing its own online portal, which will represent not only the principal repository for consulting the collections, but also a vehicle for projects created and developed specifically for the internet. One significant example of this is the publication of the *Catalogo Numerico Ricordi* (realized in collaboration with Agostina Zecca Laterza, who edited the first printed version, Rome: Nuovo Istituto Editoriale Italiano, 1984), which documents the activity of the famous Milanese music publishing house from its foundation in 1808 to about 1870. All of the works acquired by Ricordi during this time are presented in a progressive numerical order that is also approximately chronological. Information essential to the identification of the compositions is given as well as the sale price at the time of the original publication of the catalogue, information that similarly allows many first editions to be identified.

A significant step forward was the publication in late 2016 of the Ricordi Collezione Digitale,<sup>4</sup> an online publication of the iconographical collection of the Archivio, approximately 13,500 designs and images relating to the history and development of theatrical production with which Ricordi has been involved. This rich collection of images enables scholars to reconstruct the genesis of major opera masterpieces as well as the development of the music publishing industry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Archivio Storico Ricordi, through continued improvement of access and in-depth analysis of its greatly varied collections and documents, is increasingly active in projects that are being created both by the archive itself and in collaboration with public and private institutions.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 The Letters of Casa Ricordi project ([letters.archivioricordi.com](http://letters.archivioricordi.com))<sup>6</sup>

For over a hundred years, beyond their main business as music publishers, the Ricordis were also impresarios, agents, and cultural organisers, and played a central and unique mediating role within Italian musical life. This role is very well documented by a large collection of letters, both received and sent. The archive holds some 30,000 autograph letters addressed to Casa Ricordi by composers,

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.internetculturale.it>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://digital.archivioricordi.com>.

<sup>5</sup> Pierluigi Ledda.

<sup>6</sup> Patrizia Rebullà.

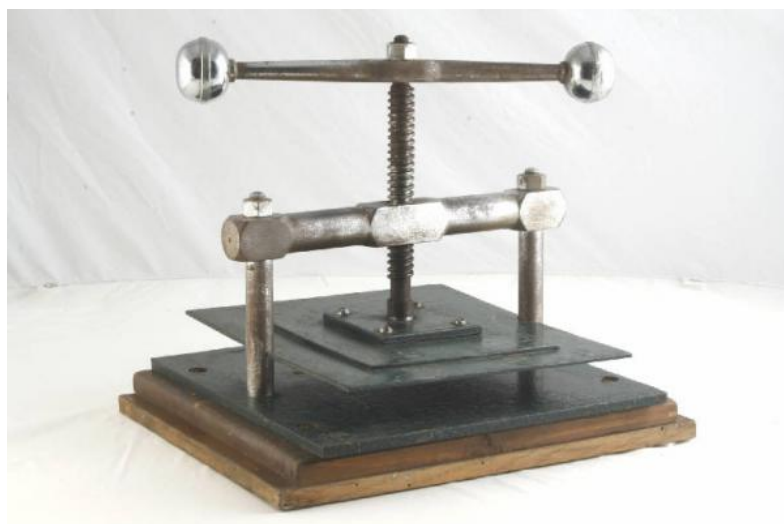
writers, librettists, singers and conductors, and an impressive and neatly ordered collection of corporate sent letters.

The whole collection of letters will be published online bit by bit. The first installment includes all the received letters, the indexes to the whole collection of copyletter books, and the personal copyletter books of Giulio Ricordi.

The importance of this collection of letters – not only for music history but also for business history – shaped the ultimate goal of the project, which is to connect the letters not only with the relevant records of the Ricordi archive, but also with other music archives over the web.

## 2.1 The copyletter books collection

Registered in 1209 bound copyletter books, the sent letters are basically complete from 1888 to 1962, with only a substantial gap of nine years between 1944 and 1953. Each volume has 500 pages of onionskin paper, numbered and certified at the end by the *Tribunale di Commercio*<sup>7</sup> to attest that no page was missing. Before the invention of carbon-copy paper, to get a copy of a sent letter this one was written with greasy, indelible ink. Once written, the letter was covered with an onionskin paper and a wet, spongy fabric, and positioned on a page of the copyletter book. The book was then inserted into the press and pressed with the aid of the handle. Within minutes, the ink melted, due to the humidity of the fabric, and the letter was reproduced.



**Fig 1:** Press for copyletters. Milano (MI), Museo Nazionale Della Scienza e Della Tecnologia “Leonardo da Vinci”

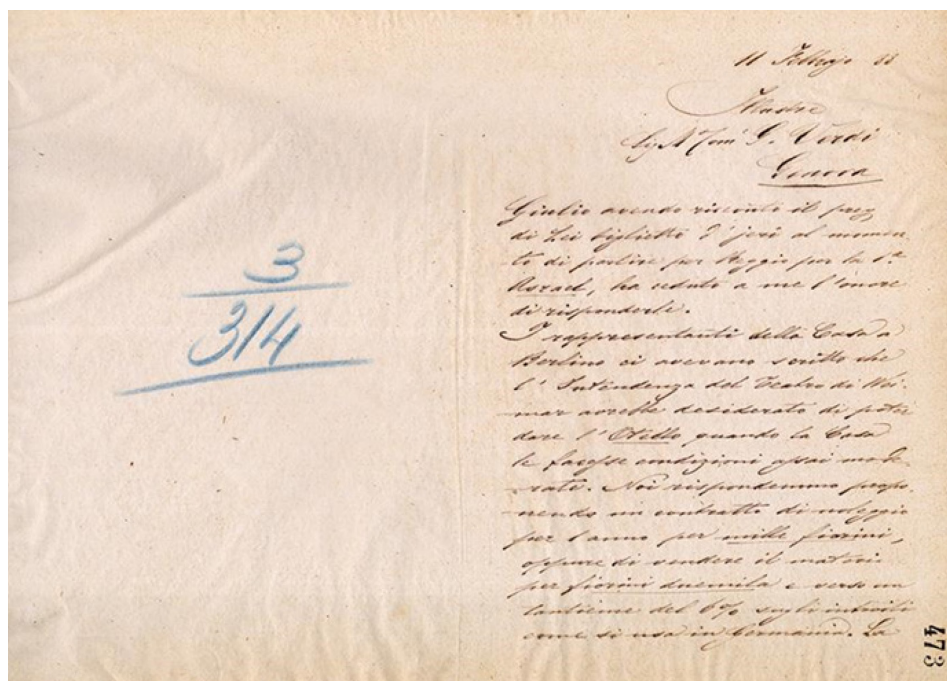
In general, one volume covers a period of fifteen days of activity. One year, thus, consists usually of some 20-25 volumes, or around 10-12,500 pages. For the 1209 volumes of the collection this means

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<sup>7</sup> The *Tribunali di Commercio* (literally, the “commercial courts”), created in Italy in 1865, were courts with jurisdiction over commercial litigations.

around 600,000 pages. Due to the business nature of the letters, they are usually not too long; therefore it is realistic to assume that there are 5,000 to 600,000 letters.

In general, they are in a good state of preservation, considering that the books were taken on and off the shelves daily, being the current and most used tool for management of the whole business activity. Each letter bears a reference in blue pencil to the previous letter addressed to the same person, easing the task to follow any given business.



**Fig 2:** Archivio Storico Ricordi, Copyletters volume 3-1888, page 473. The annotation in blue refers to the previous letter to Verdi, informing that it can be retrieved in volume 3, page 314 of the same year.

The vast majority of letters deals with small business chores, including reminders to recover credits, reminders for the return of rental scores and parts, return of refused scores to composers, management of subscriptions to the Company's journals, courtesy letters accompanying the dispatch of orders, purchase of music from composers, orders, account balances, and invoices. Others, more interesting, deal with lawyers for legal advice, with the managers of the affiliate branches, with music teachers, with other publishers in Italy and abroad. The letters are normally written either by the managers or by their assistants, and therefore alternate only a few different hands.

Telegrams are extremely frequent: they were used to send wishes, congratulations, to inform about the outcome of a performance, or to hasten the process of hiring an artist for an opera. Some of

them – possibly because telegrams were public – used a sort of encrypted language where the encrypted words all had the form of catalogue numbers of the Company, such as in this example:

CLET002118 [January 1906]<sup>8</sup>

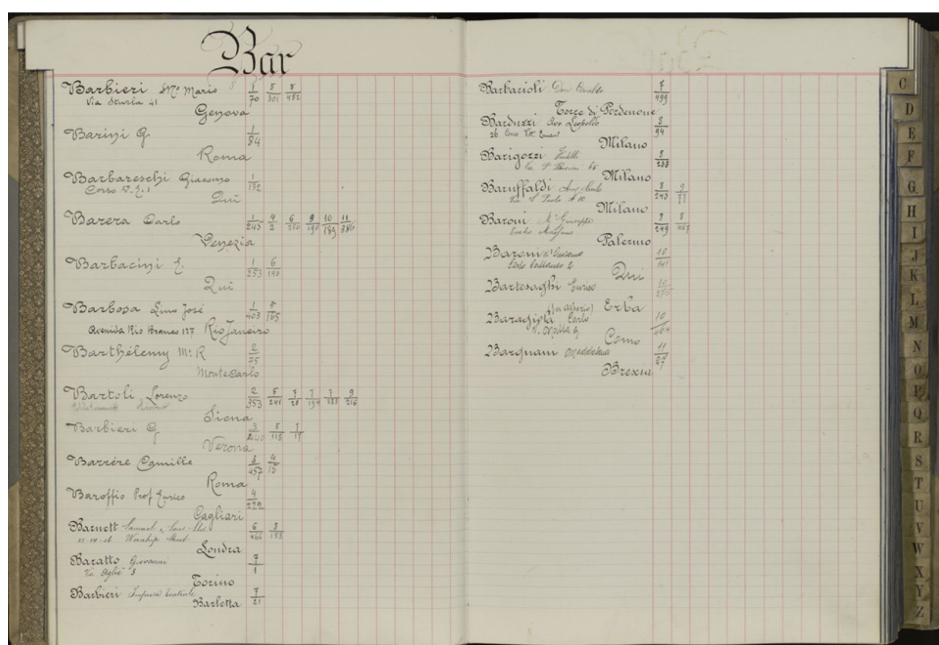
Ricordi

Hotel Royal Naples

Just fine what 44636 did fine stopping 48860 for 44291. Useless if anything prolonging sojourn for another 33741 for now 49765 39290 42664 39414. Urgent 43142 52053 for Figlia lorio costume and set designs especially the last of these which I don't like. Even if sometimes miracles can happen with improvised 50433 this isn't always the case. The 45504 that work are those 44325 46800 carefully conceived like Rigoletto Traviata. If time continued to be wasted I will take 51707 45469, as 41346 orders.

According to the personal memory of one of the employees of the archive, the code was often referred to until the 1980s, but it seems to be permanently lost.

Finally, each year is indexed in an appropriate volume that lists the addressees.



**Fig 3:** Archivio Storico Ricordi, Index of copybooks, Year 1875, page 39

This collection of 73 index volumes is digitised and accessible online on the website of the archive.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Archivio Storico Ricordi: Personal copy letters of Giulio Ricordi, vol. 2, letter n. 29, 57.

<sup>9</sup> <http://archivioricordi.com/en/main/indici>, accessed 10/07/2017.

For the years before 1888, the copybooks are lost, although 15 index volumes luckily survive. They are an important source of information, in that they at least make it possible to reconstruct the network of relations around the Company.

## **2.2 The personal copyletters of Giulio e Tito II.**

The three volumes of personal letters sent by the two General Managers Giulio and Tito II Ricordi are among the gems of the collection. Giulio Ricordi (1840-1912) was the son of Tito I, and the grandson of the founder Giovanni. He entered the Company as young as 18, and took on roles of growing responsibility until the death of his father, in 1888, when he became General Manager. A great communicator, hard worker, gifted with outstanding skills, a man with a vision and capable of assuming burdens and risks, he became the preferred contact between Giuseppe Verdi and the Company, able to patiently rebuild the trust relations broken during his father's tenure. Extremely courteous, brilliant, sharp and witty, he was also an accomplished musician whose taste and judgement were respected and feared by everyone.

His exceptionally long career is well documented by his long, conversational letters, in which he cultivated personal, confidential, often stormy but always fertile relations with his artists:

226. pp. 482-485, CLET000736, Milan, 27 November 1900, Sig. Luigi Illica, Cassano d'Adda  
(...) Here too I am stricken with an overwhelming thought that frightens me for the sake of peace in the days to come! – since, if your observation is to be taken literally, you would become as infallible as the pope, and not finding some of your ideas good.... would be nothing less than a *casus belli* [declaration of war]!! and so we begin again with those useless, sterile, inconclusive battles that ultimately come to nothing if not to make everyone, even fools, laugh behind our backs!! –

(...) because I always support my words with deeds, I will tell you that I was not convinced of the theatrical efficacy of either *La colonia libera* [by Pietro Floridia] or *Medio Evo latino* [by Ettore Panizza] as libretti, be it understood, for the realm of music.

Should you therefore be offended?... but then no more discussion is possible, and we've come back round to that infallibility I spoke of earlier!

187. pp. 382-385, Wednesday,

My dear Puccinone ["Big" Puccini]

Our last letters crossed each other and I only received yours yesterday toward evening, when I was already anxious because there had been no news from you. At last, *Laus Deo*, the Doge has reappeared. I immediately informed Illica of what you wrote to me. This Schaubert certainly is a pesky problem, no doubt about it, and we are all trying every which way to



figure things out! – Listen: do you have some good musical idea? Write it down and set it to some words that are..... Puccini-esque..... and they'll be redone later.

Nor did he restrain from artistic interventions:

(same letter) I await your arrival most anxiously. We also have that delightful task of adding the metronome markings!!!.... I did all of the stage directions for the 1<sup>st</sup> piece of the 4<sup>th</sup> Act, which Illica approved, but I want you to see them before I have them engraved.

outspoken political judgements

190. pp. 389-390, CLET002054, Milan, 27 Feb. 1896, Hon. Avv. Carlo Panattoni, Deputy, Rome

(...) You will have seen the article in *La Perseveranza*, and I believe something similar will appear in *La Nazione*. Here the lot of them are working together against Barazzuoli [Augusto Barazzuoli, Minister of agriculture and commerce] and the law [R. decree of 10 february 1896, n. 24, which extended the terms of copyright for *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*?]: 1st [Enrico] Rosmini [lawyer] and Via Pasquirolo [Casa Sonzogno] – 2nd the Fratelli Treves – 3rd that fool [Giovanni] Visconti Venosta, president of the Società [degli] Autori [ed Editori]!

and a tough management style:

80. p. 151, CLET001958, 30 April 1890 (the day before the first strike at Ricordi)

To the Direction of the Workshops

These are the definitive orders for tomorrow:

- Whoever comes to work will be considered present, even if extraordinary circumstances should make it such that work is not effectively done.
- In the event there are gatherings outside the premises intended to prevent work, the workers are free to behave as they choose: those who come to work will have their hours counted, i.e., they will in any case be credited with an entire day.
- Those who fail to come to work tomorrow will be suspended until next Monday.
- Those who are missing tomorrow and who do not return on Monday morning will be considered dismissed.
- Avoid any discussion with external elements –

G. Ricordi e C.

His last years were saddened by great concerns about the future of the Company and dire relations with his family:



2.36, pp. 68-71, CLET002094, Milan, 5 July 1907

Dear Tito,

(...) I have done everything humanly possible for you!!... this is a fine retribution, indeed, and I will personally label myself a jackass of the first order. Your moral state, the state of your finances are absolutely frightening!! (...) You are completely oblivious to reality: (...) as if you had millions in your pocket, ready not only to reassure your creditors (and quite dubious ones, truth be told) but also to allow you to lead the life of a prince, of a billionaire! Your nonchalance is absolutely monumental. You have a vile promissory note coming due, of no less than 20,000 lire!! By god, how jolly of you!! It is the stuff of comedy!

(...) Tito... watch out!... you are walking blithely toward the abyss!

Tito... watch out, and don't make your father's last years on earth even more bitter with a comportment that is sheer madness, since only a madman would want to live like a millionaire... when these millions don't exist.

This letter, which forecasts the gloomy termination of Tito II's tenure by the *Supervisory Board* in 1919, offers a sort of *bridge* towards the third volume of personal copyletters, used by Giulio's son and successor Tito II (1865-1933) from 1912, a few days after the death of his father, until the end of April 1918. Besides being a competent and sensitive musician, Tito II was an engineer, much devoted to the technical aspects of the business. He directed the *Officine Grafiche* (the Ricordi Workshops) for a few years, until his younger brother Manolo took the office, and introduced new technical and artistic ideas to the company, such as color lithography. However, when he proposed involving the Company in the emerging business of recording and cinema, the rift with his father becomes unbridgeable, mainly due to Tito's careless *grandeur* with expenditures. He bore the heavy burden of the WWI years, but despite his passionate and dedicated deeds he was unable to keep the business afloat and was obliged to hand his role over to his managers. His letters are a proof of both his difficulties and talents.

It is still not sure what the purpose of the three *personal* copyletter books was. The initial assumption, that they contained the *confidential* letters of the general manager proved to be unrealistic, not only because some – but only some – of these letters are clearly marked as *confidential*, but also because a comparison with the rest of the copyletter books reveals no reason to consider these as more confidential or problematic than the others.

A more realistic hypothesis is simply one of practical nature. If each volume of 500 pages of the 'normal' copyletter books usually covered only a couple of weeks (i.e.: 12 working days at the time), this means that someone needed to copy into the volume an average of 35-40 letters per day. This would cause an uncomfortably long time for the general manager to wait if a letter was considered

urgent. The *personal* copyletter books were thus probably at the general manager's disposal and were housed in his office.

### 2.3 The online edition of copyletter books

Giulio's 280 letters (from 1888 to 1909, 590 manuscript pages, 92,000 words, 566,000 characters) were manually transcribed. Due to their cultural importance, and to grant them a larger circulation, they were also translated into English.

With a few exceptions, marked as "unidentified" to allow future identification, all the names, places and musical works have been identified, marked-up and connected with the relevant entity of the database.

A few annotations were added only when strictly necessary to understand a given passage.

Tito II's letters (186, from 1912 to 1918, 277 manuscript pages, 35,000 words, 204,000 characters) are already transcribed. They will be made available online during 2018.

#### 2.3.1 Metadata

The structure of metadata is traditional and clear:

Lettera n. (Letter no.) : DOC01827.002

Pagina (Page): 003

Numero Pagine (Number of Pages): 1

Segnatura (Shelfmark) : CLET000518

Mittente (Sender) : Giulio Ricordi

Destinatario (Receiver) : Tito I Ricordi

Luogo (Place) : Milano

Data (Date) : 11.1.1888

Tipologia (Type) : lettera/letter

Scrittura (Writing) : manoscritto/manuscript

Lingua (Language) : italiano/Italian

#### 2.3.2 Open data, open source, open annotations

The back-end software was developed with FileMaker and it continues to serve the needs of internal management of data and archival material.

The front-end software was developed by the *Digital Humanities Institute* of the *University of Sheffield*,<sup>10</sup> using exclusively open source tools: MySQL for the database, PHP Symfony framework

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<sup>10</sup> <https://hridigital.shef.ac.uk>.

for the website programming and PHP Sonata for the admin site programming. A heavily customised CKEditor plugin is used for the text annotation feature, while D3 (javascript, SVG HTML5) with JSON are used for the data visualisations. Leaflet is used for mapping, and HTML5, CSS and Bootstrap for general website page display.

All data are freely accessible and reusable. Of course, no commercial use can be made of the material.

The project wants to be intensely collaborative and will allow comments and annotations from scholars and interested parties through a system of collaborative annotations. To avoid vandalism and spamming, the annotation feature will be moderated by the website editors.

## 2.4 Sustainability of the project

The copley letter books corpus is an invaluable tool for understanding how the business was run. However, dealing with such a large amount of material suggests that without a carefully weighed approach, the very sustainability of the project is in danger: a plan of complete digitisation and manual transcription of some 600,000 letters – not to mention its translation into a *lingua franca* such as English – is beyond the reach of any single organisation. And yet, such a collection cannot be overlooked and a creative way has to be found to make it sustainable.

The first consideration is that Ricordi's working practices were rather stable over the years, to the point that employees active in the Company in the eighties – with whom we had direct contact – witnessed how much many of their practices were still the same as those put in place by Giovanni, Tito and Giulio in the 19<sup>th</sup> c. This persistence suggests that the analysis of only some years in their entirety can represent a reasonable plan to achieve a good understanding of how the Company worked. One year per decade will thus be initially digitised and transcribed.

The second consideration was to ask the help of technology. The *Archivio Ricordi* therefore joined the highly innovative European project READ (Recognition and Enrichment of Archival Documents),<sup>11</sup> one of the largest projects of the program *Horizon 2020*.

As stated on the project's webpage, "*READ's mission is to revolutionize access to archival documents with the support of cutting-edge technology such as Handwritten Text Recognition (HTR) and Keyword Spotting (KWS)*".

The project has already developed a service platform called *Transkribus*,<sup>12</sup> a learning tool that recognizes the handwriting, such as OCR does for typed characters. The potential user needs to manually transcribe a sample of around 100 pages (20,000 words) per different hand and upload

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<sup>11</sup> <https://read.transkribus.eu>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://read.transkribus.eu/about>.

them into the system together with the relevant images. This trains the HTR engine to recognize the text and allows it to automatically transcribe the rest of the collection.

The already transcribed 280 letters by Giulio Ricordi were submitted to the system and the result is an amazing error rate around 2,5%, not far from the errors of an accurate manual transcription. This result is very encouraging and bodes well for plans for the future of the collection, since luckily the letters of Casa Ricordi are usually not only very clearly written by only a few writers and tidily kept, but also the different handwritings are very similar to Giulio's.

## 2.5 Participatory engagement collaboration

Once the letters are transcribed with the help of *Transkribus*, the plan is to build a community of volunteers around the project to amend and correct the texts. Collaborative, engaged communities are nowadays a well-established way of approaching large projects such as the Ricordi letters. The goal is not only to help get the project done, but also to allow a community of lovers to get in contact with highly meaningful material. For decades and for thousands of persons, Ricordi and its composers represented the first contact with music, whether through instrument methods or listening to one of its operas in a theatre. Ricordi also represented an invaluable piece in the history of music editorial practices and a piece of Italian history too. To open its archive to the public and to allow the public to collaborate to its enrichment will put again the archive at the centre of a system of significant relations.

## 2.6 Collaboration with other archives

Future perspectives involve the collaboration with other music archives around the world. One first example is the already established collaboration between the *Archivio Storico Ricordi*, the *Fondazione Bellini* and the *Centro di documentazione per gli Studi Belliniani* in Catania (Italy).<sup>13</sup> In 2017 the *Fondazione Bellini* published a critical edition of Vincenzo Bellini's correspondence, edited by Graziella Seminara of the University of Catania.<sup>14</sup>

Thanks to the courtesy of *Casa Editrice Leo S. Olschki*, their publisher,<sup>15</sup> the 49 letters exchanged between Bellini and Giovanni Ricordi, from March 1829 to September 1835 are presented online at the website of *The Letters of Casa Ricordi* and connected to the Ricordi database. This is a promising example of cross-breeding partnership which opens the archive to the world and which the archive hopes to replicate with other institutions.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.studibelliniani.eu/en>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.olschki.it/libro/9788822264879>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.olschki.it>.



**Helen Müller**

Archivio Storico Ricordi

Via Brera 28

I-20121 Milano

Italien

[helen.mueller@bertelsmann.de](mailto:helen.mueller@bertelsmann.de)



**Pierluigi Ledda**

Archivio Storico Ricordi

Via Brera 28

I-20121 Milano

Italien

[pierluigi.ledda@archivioricordi.com](mailto:pierluigi.ledda@archivioricordi.com)



**Patrizia Rebulla**

Archivio Storico Ricordi  
Via Brera 28  
I-20121 Milano  
Italien  
[patrizia.rebulla@archivioricordi.com](mailto:patrizia.rebulla@archivioricordi.com)